

# **SECRETS OF THE DARK CHAMBER**

**THE ART OF THE AMERICAN  
DAGUERREOTYPE**



**June 30–October 29, 1995**

**NATIONAL MUSEUM  
OF AMERICAN ART**



1. Unidentified Artist, *The Daguerreotypist*, ca. 1850, half plate. Collection of LaPlaca Productions, New York City

## INTRODUCTION

The invention of photography was one of the most significant events of the nineteenth century. Photographs have literally changed the way we see the world and have influenced us in subtle ways. Only a few months after Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's invention was announced in Paris, on August 19, 1839, the daguerreotype process was introduced to the United States and taken up by both artists and scientists. More than any other country, the United States was seized by what was called "daguerreotypomania." Within a matter of months, the process became the most common form of pictorial currency in America.

The daguerreotype was the first art form of the masses. Even though it was expensive (an average



2. Unidentified Artist, *Seneca Falls, New York (downstream)*, ca. 1855, half plate. Collection of National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection, made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment



3. Unidentified Artist, *Racing Sulky*, ca. 1849, quarter plate, Collection of George S. Whiteley IV

portrait sitting cost between \$5.00 and \$15.00 for a whole plate, about 50 cents for a sixth plate), it was far *less* costly than having a full-scale portrait or even a small ivory miniature painted. Daguerrean galleries—many with reception rooms and viewing salons as well as photographic studios—opened in every major city and nearly every small town.





4. Unidentified Artist, *Woman Writing Letters*, n.d., sixth plate. Collection of Wm. B. Becker

Some daguerreotypists, with wagons serving as "Daguerreotype Saloons . . . going about like tin peddlers," as one newspaper reported, took a more itinerant approach, traveling to rural or distant places. Although the majority of daguerreotypes taken in the United States were portraits, these early photographers also flocked to San Francisco with the gold prospectors, followed miners to South America, and accompanied archaeologists to Central America. The surface of the moon was photographed through telescopes and microbes through microscopes.

The nineteenth century's emphasis on spiritual vision as well as optics linked the daguerreotype to significant philosophical and literary developments of the time. The daguerreotypists looked at nature, as did Ralph Waldo Emerson, "with a supernatural eye," and with a clarity that was, for Henry David Thoreau, "as if I touched the wires of a battery." In a daguerrean landscape or portrait, place or identity is presented on a smooth, polished surface, seemingly without the artist's presence, so that the viewer has a more

direct relationship with the image. Images of industry and labor, such as newly important occupations (fig. 1) or views of factories (fig. 2), underscore the affinity of technological and creative invention.

Daguerreotypes are constructed images. And because so many of their makers are unknown, and their subjects cannot be identified, we become reliant on the autonomy of the image itself. Portraits such as *Woman Writing Letters* (fig. 4) are signals of the real. They embody the subject of communication itself, which survives the lost context of the making of these images. In America the daguerrean vision was an attitude not only toward face and place but also possessions and responsibilities. The ingenuousness of commonplace prosperity marks an entire category of daguerreotype images. Houses, livestock,



5. Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, *Lemuel Shaw*, 1851, whole plate. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Alice Mary Hawes and Marion Augusta Hawes, 1938 (38.34). Copyright ©1992 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art



6. Unidentified Artist, *Sisters*, 1848, sixth plate. Collection of Robert H. McNeill

carriages (fig. 3), families, and children (fig. 6) are framed with simple directness. Sharing the same impulse toward vernacular formulas as American folk art, the convention of the familiar object and the average person, rendered with bold frontality, carries with it an intensity of observation that goes far beyond description to become a form of impersonal expressionism.

Other daguerreotypes seem more traditionally artistic. In the Boston studio of Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, images of important men and women (fig. 5) were based on the established traditions of portraiture and balanced offhanded intimacy with the superficiality of a public persona. Practiced use of evocative lighting techniques and carefully considered poses, as seen in *Young Girl with Hands on Chair* (fig. 7), resulted in studio portraits that combined a good likeness with the expression of character.

The daguerreotype's great simplicity, its lack of artifice and critical aesthetics, has obscured its



achievements in our own time. Contrary to popular thinking, the daguerreotype is not a quaint antiquarian artifact but a profoundly modern object. Unlike most of nineteenth-century art, it is pure description; it is not "about" anything. It is, however, description linked to revelation. Subjects as various as domestic scenes, landscapes, and informal and formal portraits speak to us today, often in broad archetypes such as "honest man," "western expansion" (*Daguerreotype Studio and Stable*, fig. 8), and "innocent child."

The 152 daguerreotypes in this exhibition show how successfully the new medium adopted the pictorial vocabulary of traditional media and extended the customary definitions of art. During the era of the daguerreotype in America, roughly between 1839 and 1860, the question of originality posed in all the arts was answered by a medium that promised innovation. "Here is a



7. Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, *Young Girl with Hands on Chair*, n.d., whole plate. Collection of Michael Lloyd



8. Unidentified Artist, *Daguerreotype Studio and Stable*, after 1848, half plate. Collection of W. Bruce Lundberg

discovery launched upon the world, that must make a revolution in art” read one of the first announcements of the daguerreotype in the United States. The secret of the American daguerreotype was based on a vision we had of ourselves and on the technology that was required to render that image onto the daguerreotype plate. A modern hybrid—part craft, part art, part science—daguerreotypy remains a formidable process that continues to inform contemporary photographic concerns.

## THE DAGUERREOTYPE PROCESS

A daguerreotype is made on a sheet of silver-plated copper. The silver surface is polished to a mirrorlike brilliance and made light-sensitive by coating with iodine fumes. The plate is then exposed to an image sharply focused by the camera’s well-ground, optically correct lens. Removed from the camera, the plate is treated with mercury vapors in order to develop the latent image. Finally, the image is “fixed” by removing the remaining photosensitive salts in a bath of “hypo” (sodium thiosulfate) and toned with gold chloride to improve contrast and durability. If additional color is desired, the surface of the plate is tinted.

The process produced an image with a surface so fragile that it could be marred by a feather,



making it necessary to have a protective glass covering. Because the image was actually on silver, it had to be sealed carefully to avoid tarnishing and was often enclosed in a delicate frame of gilded brass called a "preserver." Glass, plate, and mat were then placed in cases made of wood or pressed paper lined with padded silk, and later velvet. Papier-mâché cases, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and handsomely painted with landscapes or flowers, were also popular. Highly ornate thermoplastic "Union cases," many with bas-relief designs after famous paintings or popular lithographs, became popular at the end of the daguerreotype era.

The first cameras required a lengthy exposure time lasting many minutes. By the 1840s various optical means had reduced the exposure time to three or at most five minutes, and by the end of the decade to a matter of seconds. Daguerreotypists learned that their plates were more sensitive in dry weather than in damp, and that just before a thunderstorm their exposures were the



9. Unidentified Artist, *Still Life with Pumpkin, Book, and Sweet Potato*, n.d., ninth plate. Collection of National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection, made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

shortest. To help the sitter hold the pose, daguerreotypists provided heavy iron headrests (like those used by portrait painters) with adjustable bands forming a semicircle that supported the back of the head. Until cameras were equipped with a mirror to correct the error, daguerrean images remained reversed from right to left.

Occasionally "mammoth" plates were produced, and some daguerreotypes were so small that they could be turned into buttons and jewelry. However, plates in America were generally produced in standard sizes. A whole plate was 6 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches; the most common size was the sixth plate, 2 3/4 by 3 1/4 inches; the sixteenth—the smallest standard size—was 1 3/8 by 1 5/8 inches. The largest manufacturer of plates was the firm of J.M.L. and W. H. Scovill of Waterbury, Connecticut, and New York City. Joseph Pennell, who left Southworth's first studio to work for Scovill, wrote his former partner in 1848 that they were "getting out 1000 plates per day all winter thus far and there is prospect of a hard year's work ahead in this line of business."



The exhibition and its programs were organized by the National Museum of American Art and made possible by the Smithsonian Institution's Special Exhibition Fund. The accompanying catalogue was supported by the Gilman Paper Company.

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**PUBLIC PROGRAMS at the  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART**

**Curators' Gallery Talk**

**Friday, June 30**

2 p.m. Meet in the lobby.

*The Art of the American Daguerreotype*

Merry A. Foresta, NMAA senior curator, photography, and  
John Wood, professor, McNeese State University, Lake  
Charles, Louisiana, co-curators of the exhibition

**Video Documentary**

**Saturday, July 1**

2 p.m. and 3 p.m. Lecture Hall

*Magic Mirrors: American Daguerreotypes*

Produced by Jim Kirchherr for KETC, St. Louis, 1995.

30 minutes. A history of the daguerreotype, featuring the  
work of the prolific nineteenth-century daguerreotypist  
Thomas Easterly and a demonstration of the process by  
contemporary daguerreotypist Robert Schlaer.

**Out of the Attic:**

**Sharing Your Early Photographs with Experts**

**Saturday, July 15**

2 p.m. Lecture Hall

Overview of early photography by Merry A. Foresta,  
NMAA senior curator, photography

2:30-4 p.m. Finley Conference Room

Discuss your early photographs with fellow collectors as  
well as experts Cliff Krainik, Jo Tartt, Jr., and  
Gary Edwards.

**Lecture**

**Sunday, July 23**

3 p.m. Lecture Hall

*A Closer Look: History Hidden within the Daguerreotype*

Matthew R. Isenburg, collector

**Video Documentary**

**Thursday, August 24**

2 p.m. and 3 p.m. Lecture Hall

Repeat July 1 program

**A Photo Fair: From Daguerreotype to Digital**

**Sunday, September 17**

1-4:30 p.m. Lecture Hall, Finley Conference Room,  
and Courtyard

Demonstrations and participatory workshops span the  
history of photography, including the daguerreotype,  
Polaroid, and digital photography.



## **Workshop for Teachers**

### **Monday, September 18**

3:30–5:30 p.m. Lecture Hall and Finley Conference Room  
Deborah Klochko, Deputy Director for Public Programs, The Friends of Photography, San Francisco, relates photography activities to the curriculum, grades 7–12. Reservations required. Call (202) 357-4511.

## **Lecture**

### **Friday, September 22**

2 p.m. Lecture Hall

*Picturing Freedom: Daguerreotypes of African Americans and the Abolitionist Movement*

Merry A. Foresta, NMAA senior curator, photography

## **Lecture**

### **Sunday, October 1**

2 p.m. Lecture Hall

*Mathew Brady and American Portraiture*

Mary Panzer, curator of photographs, National Portrait Gallery

## **Lecture**

### **Sunday, October 8**

2 p.m. Lecture Hall

*Walker Evans and the Legacy of Daguerre in American Photographs*

Jeff Rosenheim, curatorial assistant, Department of Photographs, Metropolitan Museum of Art

## **Lecture**

### **Sunday, October 15**

2 p.m. Lecture Hall

*The Waterfall in 19th Century America: Inspiration for Art and Instrument of Commerce*

Brooks Johnson, curator of photography, Chrysler Museum

## **Lecture**

### **Sunday, October 22**

2 p.m. Lecture Hall

*Photography in the Digital Age*

Peter Garfield, photographer/photo illustrator